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ABSTRACT

Testimony is offered concerning the policy implications of research findings identifying qualities common to strong families and aspects of family effectiveness. It is argued that the Federal government should recognize and respect the intact two-parent family as the most efficient family structure and must not interfere with the free exercise of the social function of religion. The six qualities common to strong families are: a shared commitment to the welfare and happiness of family members; an appreciation for each other; the spending of time together; good communication patterns; a strong spiritual or religious orientation; and an ability to cope or deal with crises in a positive manner. Specific measures are advocated which would redirect federal policy to encourage a greater number of strong families. The specific measures concern tax policy, welfare policy, and the relation between church and state. (RH)

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Testimony Before
the Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families
U.S. House of Representatives

Washington, DC
February 25, 1986

on
"The Diversity and Strengths of American Families"

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This committee deserves commendation for holding hearings on the strengths of successful families. Because of the more common, although understandable, focus on families in difficulty or need, these positive models of family vitality are too often forgotten.

By way of personal background, I should note that I serve as Executive Vice President of The Rockford Institute, a non-profit research center in Illinois which, among other purposes, focuses on the place of the family in American society. My own doctoral studies were in the fields of modern social and economic history, where I concentrated on the formulation of family policies in Sweden and other Western European countries during the 1920's and '30's. I have since written a number of commentaries on trends in American family life and their relationship to government.

I have been asked to comment on the policy implications of the findings of Drs. Stinnett, DeFrain, and Olson. In responding to this request, I will begin by making several general observations and then turn to more specific policy ideas.

In their intriguing study of family strengths, Drs. Stinnett and DeFrain have identified six qualities common to strong families: (a) a shared commitment to the welfare and happiness of family members; (b) an appreciation for each other; (c) the spending of time together; (d) good communication patterns; (e) a strong spiritual, or religious, orientation; and (f), an ability to cope or deal with crises in a positive manner. In these findings and the explanations which accompany them, I see two implications:

First, the Federal government should recognize and respect the most efficient family structure for delivering those qualities: the intact two-parent family. There is no question that some single-parents, as example, can provide strong homes for their children, and I applaud those who so succeed. Yet both common sense and social research tell us that two-parent, husband-wife families are --all other things being equal-- better able to provide a strong home life for their children and happiness and reinforcement for each other.

It is obvious, for example, that two parents are better equipped to give time to or listen to their children than is the single parent.

Empirical studies show the same results. To chose but one current public issue, recent research indicates that the highest youth suicide rate is found among families with divorced or unmarried parents; the lowest rate is found among intact families.[1] Data from the World Health Organization shows that women with children are "substantially less likely to commit suicide" than their childless counterparts and that higher levels of divorce result in higher suicide rates.[2] To choose another matter of current policy interest, new research on child abuse shows that a child reared within a home with a step-parent is 40 times more likely to become an abuse stastistic than is a similarly-aged child living with two natural parents.[3]

Such findings support the contention that federal policy measures, as a minimum, should not penalize marriage and child-bearing-in-wedlock nor reward illegitimacy, desertion, or divorce.

Second, the Federal government must not interfere with the free exercise of the social function of religion. A clear implication of the Stinnett-DeFrain work is that religious faith --or spirituality-- is of great importance to effective family functioning. This finding is confirmed by other social research. In the May 1985 issue of Journal of Marriage and Family, for example, sociologist Stephen Stack concludes that the institutions of family and religion are symbiotically related and change together over time. Indeed, he suggests that religion and family "may represent the same set of collectivistic values," namely self-sacrifice, duty, obligation, and caring for others. As religion declines, he says, so will families; as religion strengthens, so will families.[4] Governments cannot, of course, do anything to strengthen religions. Yet they can be, and at times have been, hostile to the public role and importance of churches, synogogues, and temples.

Dr. Olson's research also suggests a number of policy-relevant conclusions. First, he shows that families face the greatest stress and function the least effectively during periods when children are present, particularly adolescent children.

Second, he shows that strong families confront periods of stress primarily by calling on internal resources: they resolve their problems privately, so to speak.

And third, among the many attributes of strong families which he cites, most are matters over which the Federal government neither has nor should have influence (e.g., personality habits, marital sexual relationships, leisure activities, and household roles). There is, however, one recurring variable affecting family effectiveness --namely finances or household income and its management-- where the Federal government does play a direct role, through both taxation and welfare policies.

These general conclusions, I believe, can be translated into specific measures which would redirect federal policy so as to encourage a greater number of strong families.

TAX POLICY. Over the last twenty-five years, we have witnessed a transfer of the relative federal tax burden from corporations and persons without dependents onto the backs of parents trying to rear children. It is now generally known, for example, that the erosion of the real value of the personal exemption, tied to other policy changes, increased the average tax rate of a family with four children by over 200% between 1960 and the early 1980's. In contrast, couples without children and single persons witnessed minimal or no change in their average tax rates.

The Social Security or payroll tax has risen from less than 2% of wages in the mid-1960's to 7.15% today for employed persons, and 12.3% for the self-employed. As a regressive tax, FICA falls heaviest on persons in the middle and low-middle income ranges, precisely where young Americans of child-bearing age are disproportionately concentrated.

Since 1976, the child-care tax credit has provided meaningful tax relief, without income ceiling, to working parents who place their preschoolers in day care. Yet roughly half of American families with preschoolers arrange to provide full time parental care for their own small children, often at considerable financial and personal sacrifice. The Federal government offers these parents no similar relief.

Through such policies, the Federal government has significantly added to the financial pressures on young families, and has made the creation of new families more difficult. There are tax policy changes, though, which would reduce the negative pressures without drawing the government further into family life and decision-making.

For example, the personal exemption for children only could be raised from the current $1040 to $4000.

The Earned Income Credit could be transformed into a universal program, without income ceiling, granting the taxpayer a $500 refundable credit for each dependent child, up to the taxpayer's total FICA contribution. For low-income working parents, the maximum total credit could also be applied against the employer's FICA contribution.

The maximum child-care tax credit could be extended to parents which arrange for the personal care of their own preschoolers.

WELFARE POLICY. The general implications noted earlier suggest that "workfare" for the mothers of preschoolers is an inappropriate measure. They also suggest that welfare benefits should not discourage individual effort, work, or marriage. Within these constraints, I am drawn to a plan put forward by Michael Novak of the American Enterprise Institute. He suggests consolidating AFDC, Food Stamps, and Medicaid into a more coherent income transfer program, with such Federal aid to be channeled through local government

agencies, private charities, and churches: institutions which can more readily tailor support services to individual circumstances.

CHURCH AND STATE. To the degree Constitutionally possible, education within a religious context should be encouraged. Promising ideas in this regard include the use of vouchers in existing federally funded educational programs, including the current proposal to "voucherize" Title I.

In conclusion, let me note that the Federal government cannot create strong families. Active Federal intervention into family life, even if benevolently motivated, can be expected to have negative effects. The best approach for the government to adopt is to let families keep more of their privately earned income, to channel necessary welfare programs through people-oriented local agencies, and to let spiritual institutions blossom within our Republic.

Thank you.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Friedrich V. Wenz, "Social Areas and Durkheim's Theory of Suicide," Psychological Reports 38 (1976): 1313-14.

[2] Nick Danigelis and Whitney Pope, "Durkheim's Theory of Suicide as Applied to the Family: An Empirical Test," Social Forces 57 (1979): 1081-1106.

[3] Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, "Child Abuse and Other Risks of Not Living With Both Parents," Journal of Ethology and Sociobiology 6 (1985): 197-210.

[4] Steven Stack, "The Effect of Domestic/Religious Individualism on Suicide, 1954-1978," Journal of Marriage and Family 45 (1985): 431-47.